The Stories that Matter

Finding My Voice through the School Paper by Cooper Warner

In the newsroom of the Spotlight, my school’s newspaper, our staff often discusses the importance of our role as the voice of the students. But when I first joined the staff as a writer, I didn’t feel like a voice for myself, let alone an entire student body.

My school has about 2,000 students in grades 10 through 12, which makes it pretty easy to get lost in the crowd. I am an avid reader, an introvert, as serious as they come, and my first year at the big high school, I wasn’t just a little fish in a big pond. I didn’t even know how to swim. Looking for the thinkers and other students passionate about writing, I signed up to take Journalism in the spring semester of my sophomore year.

Press Pass
Journalistic writing came naturally to me; leads and headlines flowed easily. In writing interviews, sports reports, and editorials, I learned to tell stories as directly and passionately as I could. And I was hooked. I jumped at the chance to register for the yearlong Newspaper class for the upcoming year. Students in that class make up the staff of the Spotlight and spend class time producing the school paper.

I arrived in the fall excited to work on my first issue of the Spotlight—and then I was assigned my first story. I had to interview the associate principal who led the school’s anti-bullying campaign. This wasn’t just a graded assignment like the ones I’d done in my journalism class. This would be published and read by my peers, teachers, and administrators. Half expecting to trip on my way into the interview, I envisioned myself slowly receding into the floor. Then, remembering my responsibility as a reporter, I asked my first question.

From there, the principal and I had an earnest discussion about the school’s methods of discouraging bullying, which seemed geared toward much younger kids and which I knew my fellow students found condescending. Based on that discussion, I wrote an opinion article in which I urged faculty to speak to students as young adults instead of children. Writing this piece, I felt for the first time like a voice of the students.

Paper day arrived, and, giddy with my very first byline—a monumental moment in any writer’s life—I felt a new confidence. I felt the power of my words.

Finding My Angle
Class discussions used to scare me senseless. The idea of speaking my thoughts in front of my peers freaked me out—it was the kind of dread that made me want to stay home from school on seminar days. But when my advisory teacher told me that he and other teachers had discussed my anti-bullying article, I realized that there was another way to have a voice.
After that, I started writing articles about my beliefs, about things that matter deeply to me. One issue I’m passionate about is the stigma surrounding mental illness. Yet after interviews with multiple counselors and students, I felt lost on how to report on such a personal subject. I dubbed my rough draft “the story that will never be,” especially after Mrs. Hicks, the newspaper advisor, said my flourishing lead sounded like poetry, not reporting.

In the end, I described my own family’s struggles in dealing with mental illness. I argued for mandatory school screenings and provided information for those seeking help. My story became an honest plea for change in diagnosing, treating, and supporting those affected by mental illness. It wasn’t the article I thought I was going to write. It was better. It was the article I had to write.

**Tackling Hot Topics**

My editor noticed my investment in my work and offered me a leadership role as editor of the opinion section—a position not typically offered to juniors. As I gave direction, I also began to find it. Through trial and error I stumbled my way through Adobe InDesign, the program we use to create the paper, and eventually became comfortable with design and layout. I assigned stories, advised my peers, and continued to write my own stories as well.

We publish four issues a semester—one 16-page issue a month filled with the most timely, interesting content we can generate. Over the course of my junior year, I wrote on topics ranging from modern-day heroes to the future of our planet’s resources. My confidence grew with each paper, and when we planned the final issue of the year, I suggested a controversial topic for my story.

The May issue is the showstopper. We up the ante on content, pages, and quality, and print extra copies to distribute at graduation. For my closing act as a junior staffers, I decided to take on misperceptions of modern-day feminism. I researched, wrote, and rewrote about gender equality, the pay gap, and everyday sexism. I explained the need to improve the status of women and argued for the goal of gender equality.

Every time a new issue of the paper comes out, people rush to grab a copy. I walk down the hall and see people reading it. During Newspaper class we talk about what we’ve heard people say about the latest issue, and there’s always a lot of positive feedback about the cover, a certain article, a picture. After the last issue, shortly after the seniors had graduated and left, I received an email from a student I had never met, thanking me for writing the piece on feminism. Knowing that someone was moved enough to answer back only strengthened my confidence—and my commitment.

I submitted a letter to Mrs. Hicks to apply for the position of editor-in-chief for the following year. I shared my novel-worthy coming-of-age tale about finding my place in the newsroom and the leadership skills I learned along the way. I knew that a few of my fellow staffers had applied for the position as well, so I was overwhelmed with excitement and pride when, on the last day of school and in front of the staff, Mrs. Hicks asked me if I would take the job.

**To Be Continued**

This year, at our annual beginning of the year meeting, I asked all the returning staffs to talk about the favorite story they had written in the past year. One person mentioned an interview with the newly hired principal; another described an article about animal cruelty. I talked about my pieces on mental illness and feminism, emphasizing that our duty as writers is to report the things that matter, that that’s what makes our writing shine.

Since becoming editor, I have been doing less writing and a lot more reading. We have put out five issues of the Spotlight so far. But I’m still learning. We have three more issues to create—three more chances to learn and grow and improve—before I leave the Spotlight for college journalism and hopefully a professional career.

I’m so grateful I took this class and followed this path. I found my voice within the words; now I hope they’ll inspire others to find their voices, too.

---

**Cooper Warner** is a senior at Valley High School in West Des Moines, IA. She is passionate about photography, and in her free time she enjoys running and being outdoors. Next fall Cooper will attend Drake University in Des Moines, IA, where she plans to study journalism and political science.